

Pasture remains king

17 December 2024

With New Zealand renowned for their pasture-based systems, and supplement expenditure having been a key area of discussion in the past few tight seasons, it's timely to look at the evolution of the dairy cow's diet in New Zealand, at the same time as we update our farm financial forecast for the current season.

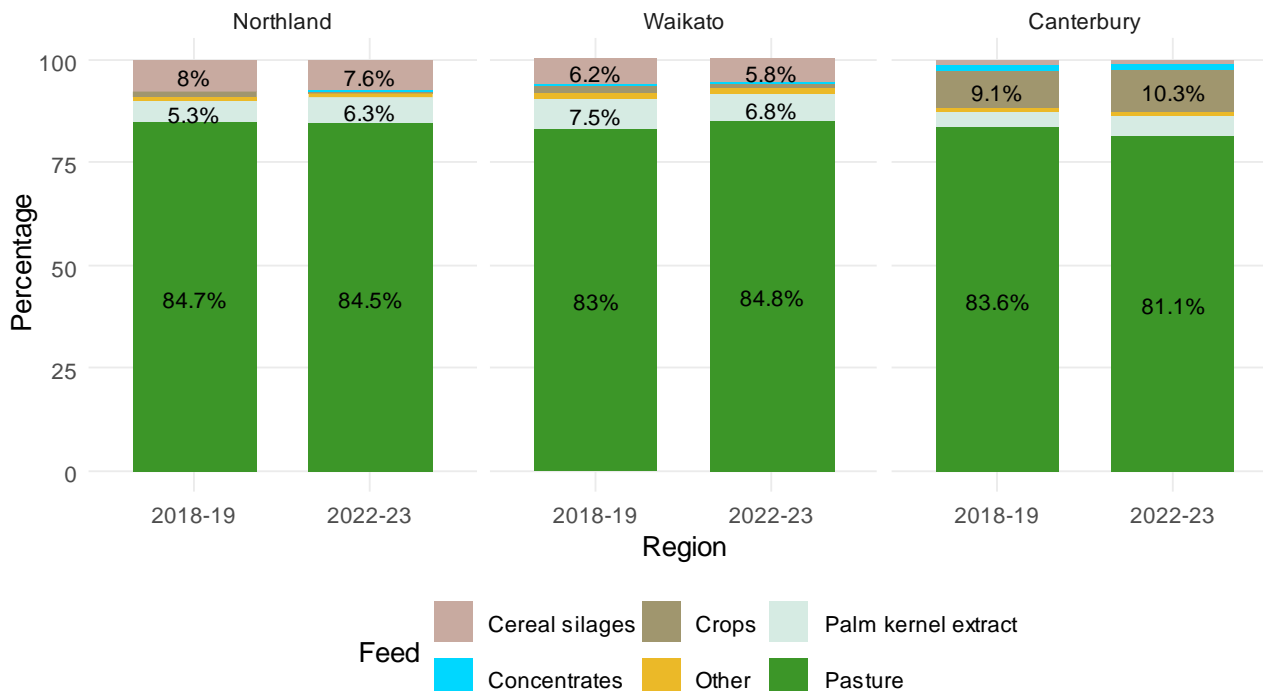
Recent analysis into feed consumed by New Zealand dairy cows has shown how their diet has evolved over time. Despite cow numbers declining by around 7% over the last five years, the total feed eaten by New Zealand dairy cows has remained relatively constant, declining by only 1.5%.

Looking back at the last thirty years, total feed eaten per cow has grown by around one percent per year, with this greater demand for feed being due to increasing liveweights and the prevalence of crossbred cows. Alongside other factors, this increase in feed has contributed to higher milksolids production per cow as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Growth in feed demand

Season	Cow numbers	Feed demand per cow in tons DM/cow/year	Total feed demand in tons DM	Average liveweight	Average kg milk solids per cow
2018-19	5,016,069	4.76	23,870,063	422	381
2019-20	5,003,698	4.76	23,805,899	418	385
2020-21	4,946,305	4.83	23,890,653	426	397
2021-22	4,842,122	4.98	24,113,768	447	386

Figure 1: Feeding strategies continue to be distinct across regions in the last five years



Note: Values less than 5% are not labelled for clarity.

In addition to the total feed eaten per cow, we can see differences in the methods used to feed cows between regions, as farms tailor their systems to their local environments. In the Upper North Island, maize silage and brought-in supplements remain key tools to fill seasonal pasture deficits, while Canterbury farmers utilise summer and winter crop grazing with irrigation to support their pastoral system.

Despite distinct strategies across the regions, pasture is still the predominant feed across New Zealand dairy farms. Over the last 5 years in some regions the percentage of pasture eaten of total feed demand has marginally decreased, while in others it has increased.

Over the past 30 years, from Northland to Southland the regional average percentage of total feed eaten of pasture has always exceeded 75%. The strong and consistent representation of pasture in the diet of New Zealand's cows continues to underpin the competitive advantage of the sector.

KPI forecasts for the current season

Higher feed prices and other on-farm costs over the last few years have increased financial pressures on many dairy farmers. However, in recent months, the impacts of subsiding inflation and interest rates alongside buoyant international milk markets, have seen a relatively muted opening to the season replaced with a strong tailwind

These changes are captured in the updated farm-level forecast on the [DairyNZ Econ Tracker](#) for the remainder of the 2023/24 season. Key changes since initial forecasts in June, include the average national forecast payout received increasing by 21% to \$10.08 per kgMS, while farm working expenses have remained relatively stable, with a small 4% increase since June.

[Visit the Econ Tracker tool](#)

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